

Horticultural Managers' Seminar: Using Extension Resources in Academic Teaching Programs

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Summary. The experience and resources of extension specialists can be used in academic teaching programs within a horticultural managers' seminar for advanced undergraduate students, drawing on production, marketing, sales, and distribution managers to discuss application of horticultural principles in work situations and other complex issues facing agricultural managers. Guest speakers present an overview of their background, work responsibilities, management philosophy, and management practices. Students interact with speakers in this informal seminar and complete written evaluations of speakers and topics for discussion in later classes. This horticultural managers' seminar exposes students to the medley of problems and opportunities facing agricultural managers, uses the resources of extension faculty in academic teaching programs, and reinforces ties between commodity departments and their respective industries.

Although split research-teaching appointments are common in land-grant universities, comparable extension-teaching appointments are more problematic because of the reluctance of extension faculty

members to commit themselves to academic teaching programs, possibly because of loss of flexibility in responding to their traditional clientele as well as administrative ambivalence in supporting these apparently conflicting roles (Libbin and Callett, 1983). However, trends suggest greater rather than lesser integration of teaching, research, and extension components within land-grant institutions (Meier, 1989).

One option for using the experience and industry contacts of extension specialists in teaching programs instruction without undermining their extension programs is a 1-credit, 2-h weekly horticultural managers' seminar, featuring guest speakers representing major commodities. Industry leaders have participated as guest lecturers in other undergraduate agricultural courses, "bridging the gap between theory and reality...stimulating student interest in learning related theoretical material..." and even affecting "their demeanor and appearance at professional meetings" (Henneberry, 1990). Other teaching methods have introduced the complex challenges faced by horticultural production, marketing, and processing managers into undergraduate horticultural curricula: Internship programs in which students are exposed to various occupations (Haque and Lewis, 1988); "people skills" courses focusing on socioeconomic aspects (Relf, 1990); the case method, long used in law, business, and medical schools and now adapted for schools of agriculture to develop greater confidence and skills in decisionmaking (Davis, 1992); senior seminar courses focusing on critical evaluation of agricultural issues (Barley, 1993).

I have worked with research-teaching faculty members in vegetable crops and ornamental horticulture to revitalize this horticultural managers' seminar. However, this paper presents my perspective as an extension specialist with a minor (10%) teaching appointment who participates in academic teaching programs.

The purpose of this course for advanced undergraduate students is to increase student awareness of the application of horticultural principles in worksituations and to discuss the complex issues facing horticultural managers today. Teaching methods, course procedures, and student response are described, as well as other benefits for both students and faculty

Based on courses developed by Norm Childers at Rutgers in the 1950s and Al Krezdorn at the Univ. of Florida in the late 1970s, this horticultural managers seminar includes discussion of horticultural production practices; philosophical, social, and environmental values; financial constraints; business acumen; new technology; and career opportunities. Following national trends (Couvillon, 1990), enrollment in this undergraduate course at the Univ. of Florida, initially titled the "Citrus Production Managers' Seminar," declined during the late 1980s and early 1990s. In an attempt to revitalize this seminar, I worked with research-teaching faculty members from the Vegetable Crops and Ornamental Horticulture Depts. during 1991 to broaden this course to include the above two commodity areas and invite marketing, sales, distribution, and personnel managers, along with production supervisors. Seminar topics now include national and international marketing and distribution, consulting, management of family-owned and corporate farms, organization of cooperatives, production budgeting, management-employee relations, the role of women in production agriculture, nursery practices, agricultural sales, farm planning and development, and trends affecting agriculture. Students are usually juniors and seniors in the College of Agriculture majoring in horticultural sciences, agricultural economics, or a related discipline, with an occasional graduate student interested in horticultural management practices. In this pass-fail course, students are graded according to their participation in class and completion of speaker evaluation forms.

About five speakers are selected to represent the production, management, and marketing aspects of each of the commodities involved. When this course emphasized citrus management only, I selected all 15 speakers based on my personal interaction with them as an extension specialist, the speaker's prominence in the segment of the industry that he or she represents, and recommendations from county agents. I continue to do so in this reorganized course, and other faculty members involved in this course use a similar procedure. Guest speakers then are scheduled on a rotating commodity basis for the 15-week semester. Although all

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three involved faculty usually attend each 2-h seminar, only the sponsoring faculty member need be present, freeing the others when necessary.

During the first class meeting, goals and procedures are discussed, with an overview of the Univ. of Florida's teaching, research, and extension functions as a land-grant institution. In subsequent classes, speakers usually arrive during the late morning, occasionally spend time with faculty members and students, and are taken for lunch before their afternoon seminar. Department funds are used to pay for meals for speakers and participating faculty members and, when requested, for per-diem expenses for speakers. Honoraria are not offered. Although some potential speakers decline, most participants are enthusiastic about participating, freely volunteering their time and resources. Follow-up letters express appreciation for their participation. Some speakers plan other activities while on campus (interviewing graduating students during an Agricultural Careers Day; visiting with faculty members in related areas; doing library research, etc).

After guest lecturers are introduced, students then introduce themselves to the speaker, commenting on their own horticultural background, major area of study, and future plans. Growers, especially alumni, are interested in the background and goals of students and frequently orient their presentations towards the expressed interests of students. Guest speakers usually begin with a broad overview of their responsibilities, followed by slides and videotapes that supplement their presentations. When speakers mention unusual management practices and controversial issues, discussions involving faculty members, students, and managers provide a forum for the development of critical thinking skills increasingly advocated by extension educators (Jones, 1992). When speakers mention sensitive issues such as sexual role models, environmental stewardship, and property rights, faculty members facilitate discussion of these issues as they occur. About half-way through the 2-h class, the group breaks for 10 min and, during this time, students interact personally with the speakers. This undergraduate seminar course is advertised in a seminar bulletin distributed university-wide, occasionally attracting additional students and faculty members.

Students are asked to submit written evaluations of each speaker at the end of each seminar, comparing horticultural concepts discussed in courses with specific production practices described by growers. Comments also are made on personnel management, marketing, and harvesting procedures, future prospects of the specific horticultural enterprises discussed, insights gained, and changed perceptions about job responsibilities. These written comments are reviewed by each of the three faculty members and are used to evaluate speakers for future seminars, as well as to identify specific issues requiring brief discussion at the beginning of the next seminar class.

Students' comments on these evaluations forms were recorded during the first semester that this horticultural managers' seminar was offered and are paraphrased here to outline the range of topics discussed.

Established companies offer different working environments and challenges than do small businesses or work as an independent consultant, especially in terms of the nature of entry-level positions, definition of career goals, and the need to maintain a healthful balance between the demands of work and family life. Developing a successful horticultural business, large or small, requires dedication and perseverance; management expertise that may come only from personal experience at every job; the ability to motivate and retain employees who sometimes work for minimum wages; compliance with regulations on labor and agrichemical usage in both large and small firms, and strategies for dealing with drug abuse in the workplace. For example, one enterprising owner/manager of a woody ornamental nursery campaigned for new customers by canvassing retail outlets supplied by other nurseries, asking potential customers what it would take to shift their business to him. The key to success for an innovative produce broker with an agricultural background was being innovative in selling himself/herself and his/her products, being enthusiastic about his/her job, and being loyal to his/her employer. He was resourceful in researching and delivering recommendations to his clients about storage life, preparation, and presentation of the fresh fruit and vegetables he distributed to cafeterias, fine hotels, and restaurants. A successful horticultural

consultant who had worked both in the United States and abroad cited the challenges of conducting on-site experiments under unusual soil, climatic, and labor conditions and working within indigenous legal and political systems. One former citrus county agent, now a consultant, impressed students with the complex consulting and management services he offered, involving a team of horticulturists, civil engineers, finance companies, governmental and regulatory agencies, irrigation companies, and heavy equipment and construction companies in planning and developing a new citrus planting.

International marketing of horticultural products requires an awareness of the history, politics, and specific demands and preferences of different countries. For example, new markets and consumer tastes in eastern European countries could be identified; relationships could be improved with countries such as South Korea, with negative trade deficits associated with barriers to imported citrus; Japanese prefer premium white seedless grapefruit, which must be produced either in Caribbean fruit fly-free zones or treated to eliminate that pest according to Japanese quarantine regulations; in domestic and other international fresh fruit markets, demand has shifted from white to pink and red grapefruit; sugar cane and citrus production by both Cuban and American citizens reinvesting in Cuba will have an impact on international marketing of Florida produce. Some students commented that they had no previous exposure to international marketing, sales, or shipping of Florida fruits, vegetables, and ornamentals, and that they were motivated to learn more about marketing the commodities they studied.

This horticultural managers' seminar accomplishes several goals. Advanced students are exposed to the complex problems and opportunities of working horticultural managers. The experience and industry contacts of an extension specialist can be used in academic teaching programs, enhancing the relationship among the specialist, guest lecturers, and students without impairing the flexibility of that extension worker's program. Guest speakers—many of whom are industry leaders—participate in teaching programs, reinforcing relationships with faculty

members in commodity departments and interacting with students, some of whom are interviewed later for internships or employment in their firms. For graduating students entering the work force, agricultural managers' seminars can fulfill the mission of the land-grant university for practical education for the marketplace of the 1990s.

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